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ABSTRACT

Based on the view that violent behavior is learned and often learned early in life, this pamphlet shows parents how they can help protect young children from getting involved with violence and increase that child's chances for a safe and productive future. The pamphlet cautions parents that early learning is powerful and that children learn how to behave by watching people around them; it further advises parents that children need to feel safe and loved and that exposure to violence is harmful to them. Suggestions for preventing violence include ways to manage anger and to help children manage their anger by responding in a calm, respectful manner and by teaching them social problem-solving techniques. The pamphlet delineates the reasons for anger in children of different ages, and offers some discipline techniques, including the use of natural and logical outcomes and timeout. The influence of media such as television and videos is discussed, and suggestions are given for preventing media violence from influencing young children. The pamphlet cautions parents about weapons and how to teach their children about them. The pamphlet concludes with a discussion of the importance of the daily experiences parents provide to prevent violence and to increase their child's chances for a productive, happy life. (KB)

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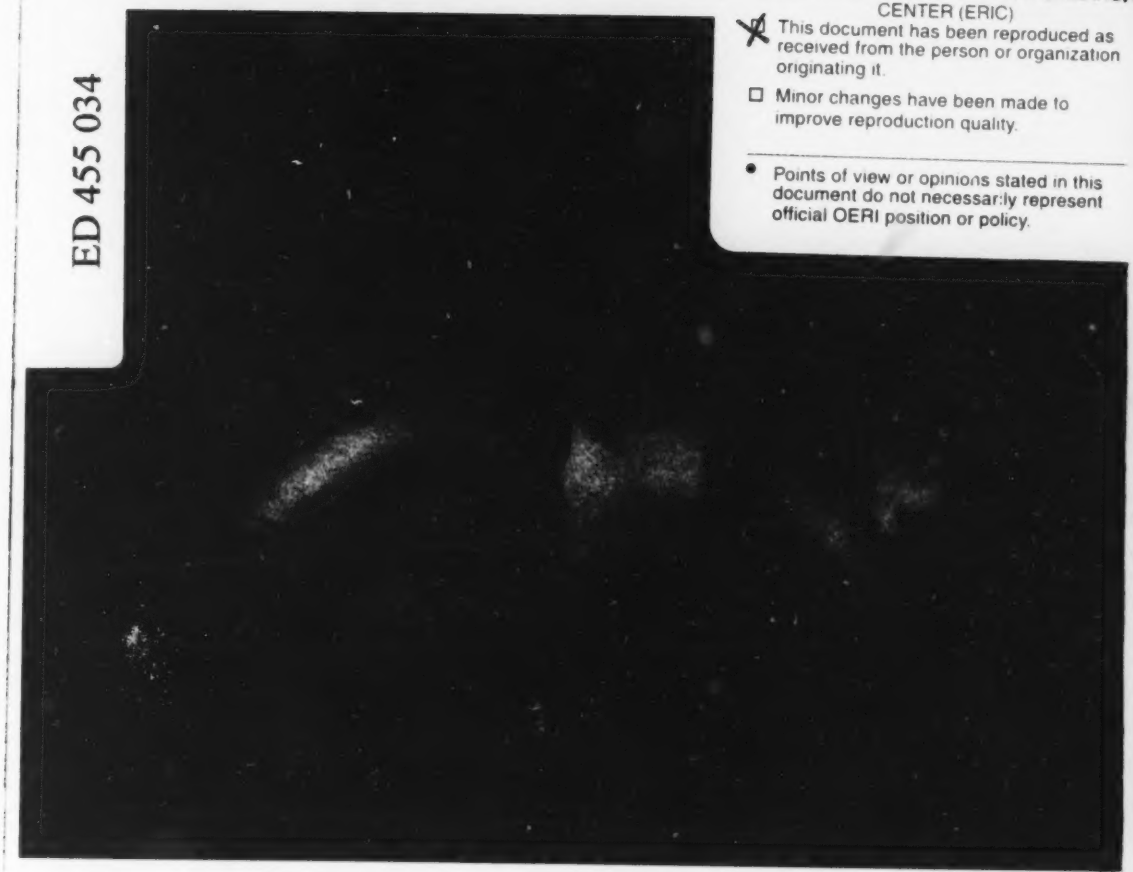

Violence Prevention

for Families of Young Children

PS 029690

adults & children together

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a child learns for life...

What you do... Can help your child rise above violence...

Almost every day, newspaper headlines and TV broadcasts tell us that violence threatens our children.

If you are like most parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and others who take care of young children, you worry most about the youngsters' safety. You don't want them to be exposed to violence, but in today's world, often that just isn't possible.

But you can do something about it! You can help protect a young child from getting involved with violence, and you can increase that child's chances for a safe and productive future. The same skills that help children avoid violence also lead them to better relationships, a more fulfilling life, and better careers.

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Early Learning is Powerful

Violent behavior is learned, and often it is learned early in life. But just as children can learn to be violent, they also can learn to be kind-hearted. They can learn constructive ways to solve problems, deal with disagreements, and handle anger. Children who learn these skills early in life actually are learning violence prevention—something that will be valuable for the rest of their lives. With these skills, children are far less likely to grow up to be violent, or to be victims of violence.

Children need to feel safe and loved

First and foremost, a child needs to feel safe at home. There is no surer way to start children on the right path in life than to provide consistent, reliable, loving care. How you relate to the children inside your home is perhaps the most powerful tool for protecting them from violence outside the home.

Children are people watchers

Children learn how to behave by watching people around them. Your child learns by watching characters on television, in videos, and in movies. And, above all, your child learns by watching you. Think for a moment about how you react to difficult situations. How do you act toward your spouse? Your friends? Your neighbors? Other family members? You are teaching your child, by example, how to get along in the world. When you and others come together to solve your problems peacefully, your child learns how to deal with people in a positive way. But when you or someone close to your child is aggressive and destructive, the child learns to act the same way.

Just being exposed to violence is harmful

When children, even very young children, see a violent act, they are deeply affected by it. This is especially true if the violence involves a family member or someone they know in the neighborhood. What can you do to help? First, allow the children plenty of time to talk about violence they have seen at school, in the neighborhood, or on TV. Encourage them to express their feelings about it. Second, make sure your children get to see many more examples of people dealing with each other in a spirit of friendly cooperation rather than by threatening violence or hurting each other. The children will gradually realize that there are many ways to deal with people and resolve conflicts peacefully, and that violence is not the best way to get what they want.

When children are victims

Sadly, children themselves are sometimes the victims of violence. A child who is being abused lives with constant fear and pain. And while the physical wounds may heal, the emotional scars can last a lifetime. If you know of a child who is being abused, or if you suspect that someone may be abusing a child in your care, seek help immediately. Otherwise, that child may grow up to become a violent adult or may fall into a pattern of repeatedly being victimized.

Preventing Violence

Handling anger

Everyone gets angry at times—it's part of being human. Anger is a normal feeling that can be helpful, because it signals that change is needed. But anger also can get out of control. Helping children learn to manage anger is a very important part of early violence prevention.

It is hard for very young children to understand and manage their anger. As your young child grows, gradually teach these principles:

- It's okay to be angry.
- There are "okay" ways and "not okay" ways to show your anger.
- It's not okay to hurt anyone, to break things, or to hurt pets when you are angry.
- It's okay to tell someone that you are angry.
- There are ways to calm yourself when you are angry.

Young children get angry for many reasons

Several things stir young children's anger, and they show it in different ways. Here are some typical examples:

- When infants, birth to about 9 or 10 months, feel bad because they are hungry, sick, or in pain, or when they are startled by a loud noise—they show their anger by crying and thrashing their arms and legs.

- Older babies, up to about 18 months, still show anger with crying and fussing, but the reasons may be different. This tends to occur when they don't get an appealing object, when they can't be with the person they want to be near, when they are frightened, or when they feel bad because of illness.

- From about age 18 months to 4 years, children are easily frustrated and will aggressively try to get or to keep what they want. They may grab a toy or take a cookie away from a friend, push a child away from the place they want to stand, or hit someone who takes something away from them.

- Children from about ages 4 to 8 years old gradually understand more, and they get angry about what people say, as well as what they do. They get better and better at expressing themselves with words, and their understanding of the world expands dramatically. Their aggression often is aimed at hurting another person—perhaps directly, by hitting or fighting, perhaps indirectly by damaging something the other person cares about.

Children can learn to manage anger

Young children who learn to manage angry feelings are more likely to make and keep friends. Also this skill can help prevent and resolve conflicts at home. Schoolchildren who are constantly arguing and fighting are the ones most likely to have problems in school and to have trouble making friends. And these issues can later lead to quitting school, having problems with the law, and abusing alcohol and drugs.

Importantly, helping a child to control angry feelings begins when you respond to the child's anger in a calm, respectful manner:

- Calm an infant by holding and comforting the infant, as well as removing or changing what caused the fussing.
- Encourage a toddler to use words to tell you what he or she feels, even in simple language. "I mad," or "Want doll," is a reasonable response from a little boy or girl.
- Help preschoolers begin to learn and practice a self-calming method—taking a few deep breaths, sitting down, counting to 10, or repeating, "Be cool, be calm," for example.
- Encourage kindergarten and elementary school youngsters to explain what happened and how they feel. After a child is calm, ask what is wrong and LISTEN to the explanation, without interrupting. Help the child think about and tell ways to change the situation that caused the anger.

Remember, the most important way to teach your child how to handle anger is for you to show that you can calm yourself, think about your own actions, and take reasonable, nonviolent steps to change a situation that made you angry.

If you have trouble controlling your temper, it can help you and your children if you get help through anger management training or by seeing a mental health professional.

Social problem solving

Problem solving doesn't just mean doing arithmetic or figuring out how to fix a leaky faucet. Many of the toughest problems, sometimes involving strong feelings, occur between people. Adults and children who can manage the strong feelings and resolve conflicts reasonably, without hurting someone, have good skills for social problem solving.

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Start early to help young children STOP and THINK about different ways to solve a problem. Help them choose to act in a way that is nonviolent, safe, and fair. Around age 3, children are usually ready to begin simple steps of thinking and making choices which are part of social problem solving.

As children grow, they get better at solving problems. Around age 4 or 5, children can think of more than one way to solve a problem, and they can predict how people will react to their actions. ("If I hit George when he wants my truck, he will hit me back. If we take turns, he won't grab it any more.") They also learn to name their own feelings and those of others. ("I am mad because Sandra won't let me on the swing." "Carlos is sad because his balloon popped.") Further, they begin to care about other people's feelings and well-being ("Mark, I'm sorry you hurt your knee." "Grandma will be happy when she sees the picture I colored for her.").

Children aged 6 to 8 can understand how others might see a problem differently, and they can talk about a situation more clearly. They also develop a conscience and worry about rules and fairness.

Be sure to praise a child who does any of these things:
- Calms down
- Tells how he or she feels
- Describes a problem
- Thinks of solutions to a problem
- Acts in a way that is safe, fair, and nonviolent

Make sure that your children understand that it's okay to make mistakes trying to solve problems and that we can learn from our mistakes. Always encourage children to seek help from trusted adults when a problem is too hard for them to handle.

Most of all, remember that children learn by watching you solve problems with respectful words and nonviolent actions.

Discipline

No child's behavior is perfect all of the time, and some kids are harder to deal with than others. When you must act to stop a child's bad behavior, your goal should always be to do it with self-control and without violence. The goal of discipline is to teach children self-control, not to punish them.

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The best way to get children to behave the way you want is to pay attention to them when things are calm and comment on their good behavior. Praise children for sharing a toy with a playmate without being told to do so or for putting their toys away when they are finished with them or for avoiding conflicts with other children. If children get attention only when they misbehave, they repeat the bad behavior.

Discipline is an important job—a young child's constant out-of-control behavior can:

- Hurt that child or others
- Interfere with the child's learning and making friends
- Damage property
- Lead to school failure
- Create tension and stress at home
- Set the stage for serious problems as the child grows older

You can teach a child self-control by:

- Setting reasonable limits and rules
- Having consistent, age-appropriate standards for behavior
- Showing consistent consequences for misbehaving
- Letting the child see good behavior by your example

When young children "act up"

- Let children know what you expect, with simple statements. "Please put away your toys right now."
- Give warnings and reminders, without threats. "When you put away your toys, then you can go outside with your friends."
- Tell a child what to do rather than what not to do. "Please use a soft voice," instead of "Stop yelling!"
- Follow through with praise for following instructions or consequences for disobeying.

Sometimes a youngster's bad behavior can be so frustrating that a parent or caregiver strikes the child without stopping to think. Yet children become confused, scared, and angry when adults hurt them—especially the adults whom they depend on to love and protect them. And continual, harsh punishment can lead a child to become aggressive and out of control—just the opposite of what you want to accomplish.

Some discipline methods to try

Ignore some behavior that is irritating but not dangerous—for example, whining, swearing, or having tantrums. It may be hard to do this, but paying attention to such behavior may just encourage more of it.

Taking away a privilege can help to stop bad behavior. Once children are old enough to understand, tell them that something they like (riding a bike, playing at a friend's house, watching a favorite TV show) will be taken away if they continue to misbehave. This sets up a choice: With self-control, they get what they like; if they continue to behave badly, they don't. This kind of approach teaches that actions have consequences.

Natural and logical outcomes can teach lessons. (A child puts her cookie on the floor, you warn her, she persists, the dog eats the cookie, and she has none.) Of course, this should never be your approach when safety is at stake—for instance, when a child plays with matches or walks into the street. If a child misbehaves, respond in a way that lets the child see the connection between his or her action and your reaction. (A child colors on the wall, her crayons are taken away, and she helps clean the wall. A youngster screams for candy in the store, the parent takes him home without the treat.)

When a child ignores your warning about what might happen, sometines your best option is to let it happen.

When young children are fighting or arguing, place yourself between them. If possible, kneel to get to the children's eye level. Let them know you understand that they are upset. If they are fighting over a toy or object, hold the object until the problem is settled. Ask each child to tell you what is wrong and listen to what they say. Ask both children to think of ways they might resolve the problem. Help them think about consequences ("If we do this, then what will happen?"). Help them choose a solution that is fair and nonviolent. Watch what happens: If it works, praise them; if not, have them choose another solution and try again.

If one child clearly has been hitting or picking on another, speak to the victim first, allowing him to say what he wants and how he feels. Encourage the victim to face the bully and say how he feels—perhaps something like this: "I don't like it when you push me. It hurts and makes me mad!" Be sure that the bully doesn't get more attention than the victim gets.

Timeout is a method that some families use to give children (and adults) a short cooling off period. If you use it, keep the time short and follow these guidelines:

- Choose a safe, supervised place where the child can be quiet and undisturbed.
- Tell the child that at the end of the timeout, the two of you will talk about the troublesome behavior.
- Tell the child to sit quietly, without talking to anyone, until he or she is calm and ready to have a discussion.
- When timeout is over, keep your promise and talk with the child about what happened.

About spanking

People have a variety of opinions about spanking, but the reality is that hitting or spanking your child sends a confusing message. It says it's okay to hurt someone you love in order to control them or solve a problem. Repeated harshly, over time, it will train children to punish others with force—the same way that they were punished.

Media influences

Media—especially television, but also videos, movies, comic books, music lyrics, and computer games—have a strong influence on children. On the one hand, such media offer powerful tools for learning and entertainment; on the other hand, violence in the media is damaging for young children.

Research shows that violence in the media has the following effects on children:

- It gives children violent heroes to imitate.
- It increases mean-spirited, aggressive behavior.
- It shows children that violence is all right as a way to handle conflict.
- It makes it easy for children to ignore suffering and the bad effects of violence.
- It causes fear, mistrust, and worry (sometimes including nightmares).
- It whets their appetite for viewing more violence, in more extreme forms.

And, bear in mind that even when the "good guys" win, the effects are the same.

As children get older, those who watch a lot of television also have lower grades, especially in reading. After all, they are substituting TV for homework, study time, reading practice, using their imagination, and interacting with others. Start limiting children's TV viewing while they are young to help prevent later problems in school.

The extent of children's exposure to television violence is stunning. Violence also is a theme in many popular video and computer games for children, and new research suggests that those games may be more harmful than television and movies.

Here are some ways that you can prevent violence in the media from having such a strong influence on your young children:

- Watch TV with your children and talk about what happens in the shows.
- Monitor what your kids watch or play.
- Limit the number of hours your children watch TV or play video games.
- Insist that schoolwork and family responsibilities are done before TV is allowed.
- Prevent the children from watching violent shows.
- Help them select shows that promote learning and positive development.
- Tell babysitters, caregivers, and family members about your rules on TV watching.

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Talk with children about violence in the media.
In those discussions, you can teach some important lessons:

- Violence in the media is make-believe, not real.
- Real-life violence hurts people.
- Guns, bullets, knives, and other weapons on TV are fake; real weapons hurt or kill people.
- If a show is scary or confusing, talk to an adult about it.

Also, teach your children that violent toys may seem exciting in "pretend" games, but that real-life violence is not fun. Encourage your children to pretend and play in ways that don't involve violence.

Caution about weapons

A child's curiosity about weapons can be deadly. It is heart-breaking to hear of accidental shootings and serious injuries by children who handle guns or play with them. Teach children to never touch a gun, bullet, or knife. Let them know that if they find one, they should not touch it, but should tell a trusted adult about it.

If you own a gun, never leave it out where a child might get it. Always lock your unloaded guns and bullets separately, in secure places that children cannot reach.

At home and in your community

The daily experiences you provide for young children are powerful, not only for preventing violence, but also for increasing their chances to have a productive, happy life. If you stay at home with your children, have a schedule and plan activities for them and with them. If your children are in a child-care program while you work outside of home, make sure that it offers chances for constructive play and learning opportunities, with well-qualified staff who promote positive social behavior. Research shows that high quality child-care programs can reduce behavior problems in later childhood.*

Teach your child a sense of community by being part of the community yourself. Participate in activities to keep your neighborhood safe and to prevent violence.

Give your children opportunities to play with other children and to interact with people of all ages.

Give children your time—play together, eat together, watch their activities, work on projects together, just hang out and share everyday experiences.

As part of a young child's family, you have a critical influence on that young child's development. What you teach children today will make a difference in who they are tomorrow. You are the best person to show a path to nonviolence for the children, for your family, and for your community.

**The National Association for the Education of Young Children accredits early childhood programs that meet its standards. A nationwide listing of accredited programs can be found at the association's Web site.*

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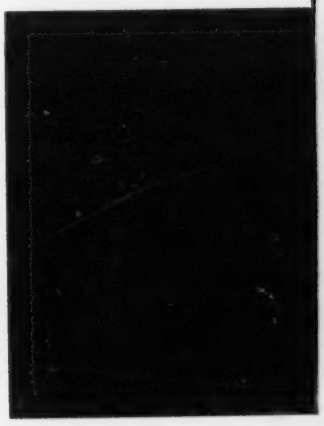

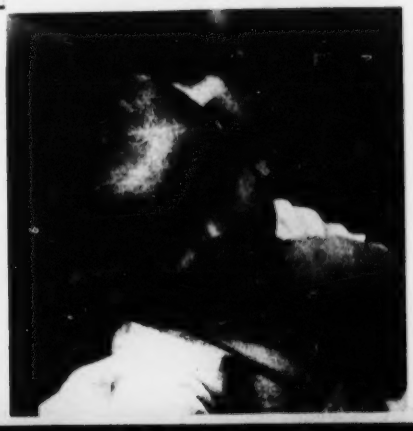

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